

The failure of empathy: European responses to the refugee crisis

www.opendemocracy.net/can-europe-make-it/naomi-head/failure-of-empathy-european-responses-to-refugee-crisis

Naomi Head

In contrast to official policies, there has been a wide array of responses seeking to support and welcome refugees from within civil societies, and these should be highlighted.



Jewish refugees aboard MS St. Louis, 1939. Wikicommons/ PD-US. Public domain.

Empathy can be defined as standing in the shoes of another person, of walking a few miles in those shoes. It is an imaginative activity aimed at understanding the perspectives and feelings of others in order to guide one's own actions.

Entering into empathy with others is often cited as a source of peacebuilding, integration, an aid to bridging social divides, increased understanding and compassion. Widely understood to be a beneficial process for cohesive and just societies, and recognised as a fundamental part of being human, it is hard to see much evidence of this kind of empathy in European politics towards the current refugee crisis.

Seizure of assets and painting doors red

In a move which has raised chilling historical comparisons, the [governments of Denmark and Switzerland](#) recently passed legislation permitting the seizure of refugees' assets of value. Along with Germany, Austria, France, Hungary and others, Sweden has closed its [borders](#) and restricted freedom of movement between Sweden and Denmark.

In the UK asylum seekers have been made to wear wristbands at all times with the threat of not being fed if they fail to do so. In the UK asylum seekers have been made to wear [wristbands](#) at all times with the threat of not being fed if they fail to do so, and to live in accommodation with [doors painted red](#); measures intended to clearly identify them which have resulted in expressions of violence and racism. At the same time, the UK government resists its

obligations to unite refugees in Calais with [family members](#) already in Britain. Moreover, in the face of contrary expert advice, the British government recently declared [Eritrea](#) safe to return to, thus facilitating the rejection of Eritrean asylum applications. Both the 2016 [Shaw Report](#) commissioned by the Home Office on the 'Welfare in Detention of Vulnerable Peoples' and the [All-Party Parliamentary Groups on Refugees and Migration Inquiry](#) into the 'Use of Immigration Detention in the United Kingdom' reported callous and unacceptable conditions in UK detention centres. Meanwhile, the French government permits refugees to live in conditions in Calais and Dunkirk which lack even [basic sanitation and shelter](#).

Remembering the holocaust

On 27 January, the world commemorated International Holocaust Remembrance Day. Designated by the UN as such in 2005, the purpose was to remember the victims of the Holocaust. It is, one might suggest, a reminder of the global commitment to human rights. Being familiar with the legacy of the Kindertransports – the acceptance of 10,000 Jewish children from Germany into the UK between November 1938 and September 1939 – there is the assumption perhaps that Europe was a haven for the exodus of Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany in the 1940s and that it is only more recent wars and crises which have triggered harsher asylum and immigration policies in the name of security.

In fact there was widespread hostility to Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi Germany. In fact there was widespread hostility to Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi Germany. Making this point in 2002, [Anne Karpf](#) wrote in The Guardian that 'Rather than relaxing entry requirements for Austrian Jews after the Anschluss - Germany's annexation of Austria in March 1938 - the British government tightened them, introducing new, strictly controlled visas precisely to restrict their numbers.'

At the [Evian conference](#) in July 1938 called by President Roosevelt to develop a collective response to the general refugee problem, western governments declined to accept refugees. The British delegate 'declared that their overseas territories were largely unsuitable for European settlement, except for parts of East Africa, which might offer possibilities for limited numbers. Britain itself, being fully populated and suffering unemployment was also unavailable for immigration. ... Reflecting wider European sentiment (and echoing arguments for restrictions on immigration and asylum today), the French delegate stated that France had reached 'the extreme point of saturation as regards admission of refugees.' [Karpf](#) continues to point out that the minutes from a cabinet meeting in 1945 note "the admission of a further batch of refugees, many of whom would be Jews, might provoke strong reactions from certain sections of public opinion. There was a real risk of a wave of anti-semitic feeling in this country."

Recent debates last year in the UK in which the government advocated turning back migrants [intercepted by British ships](#) in the Mediterranean is reminiscent of the treatment of Jewish refugees on the ship, the SS Exodus, by the British navy in 1947.

The picture painted by the contemporary array of hostile and dehumanising policies implemented widely by European governments in response to the influx of refugees is an ugly one. Despite initial welcomes for refugees by some states, notably Germany and Sweden, current events have precipitated a crisis which extends beyond the mechanics of European border control and extends to far graver questions around the future of European identity, hospitality, tolerance, and xenophobia.

Local people

In contrast to official policies, however, there has also been a wide array of responses seeking to support and welcome refugees from within civil societies and these should be highlighted as offering alternative political paths. [Grassroots funding efforts](#) have seen the delivery of considerable financial, educational, and material resources to refugees in Calais. Local residents and NGOs in Calais and Dunkirk have sought to resist the [French government's policy](#) of violence and neglect towards the [refugees](#) living there. Volunteers on Lesbos, Samos, and other Greek

islands have been vital actors welcoming and supporting refugees arriving on Greek shores where institutional mechanisms have failed or been non-existent.

There has, I suggest, been a recognition of both the [complexity](#) of the issues and the [humanity](#) of these refugees which refuses to paint them as potential terrorists, welfare-seekers, or threats to the moral fabric of our societies. Exercising empathy – not just pity – and solidarity with refugees is a much needed response to resist government policies that seek to dehumanise and alienate refugee communities.

Such policies, reinforced through references such as those recently made by David Cameron to ‘[swarms of people](#)’ and ‘[bunches of migrants](#)’, not only actively misrepresent the narratives and origins of refugees but contribute to a politics of fear and a narrow focus on security that ultimately is harmful to both a culture of human rights and to productive and well-integrated communities in the UK and elsewhere.